

ARTICLE APPEARS
ON PAGE A3.

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Airman Is Accused Of Spying Attempt

Clerk Allegedly Tried to Give Soviets Secrets

By Michael Weisskopf
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An Air Force enlisted man who worked in a squadron that flies highly sensitive "Blackbird" spy planes has been arrested and charged with attempting to pass intelligence information to the Soviet Union, Pentagon and law enforcement officials said yesterday.

Airman 1st Class Bruce D. Ott, 25, was arrested Jan. 22 by Air Force and FBI officials in Davis, Calif., according to a spokesman at Beale Air Force Base in northern California, where Ott has been based since April, 1984. He was formally charged three days later and is being held at Beale, the spokesman said.

Officials said that Ott, who worked as an administrative clerk in the office of the 1st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, was caught in an FBI "sting" operation when he allegedly tried to pass classified national defense materials to U.S. agents posing as Soviet spies. It was unclear whether Ott contacted Soviet officials.

Beale's squadron operates the SR71 reconnaissance plane, dubbed the "Blackbird," which is known as the world's fastest, highest-flying aircraft. The plane routinely is used by the United States for sensitive intelligence-gathering missions and is capable of surveying more than 100,000 square miles in an hour.

The squadron is part of the 9th Reconnaissance Wing at Beale, which operates the SR71, as well as the newer TR1 and the older U2 surveillance planes.

Air Force officials refused to specify what material Ott is accused of attempting to pass to the Soviets. One officer speculated that it would have been of limited value, presumably because of Ott's position as a clerk. But another official noted that Ott worked in the squadron's orderly room, where messages on SR71 missions circulated.

It was unclear what level of security clearance Ott held. But a law enforcement source said that he may have had access to SR71 manuals and other materials that could have better informed Moscow about the powerful surveillance plane, which can fly more than three times the speed of sound at altitudes of 80,000 feet.

Officials said that FBI agents in the Sacramento division uncovered and intercepted Ott with the help of the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations.

Ott is charged under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and will be tried by a military court. After a Navy spy scandal last summer, Congress amended the code to authorize the death penalty for servicemen convicted of espionage.

Ott, of Erie, Pa., joined the Air Force in September 1983 and was assigned to Beale five months later. The Associated Press quoted relatives as saying that he was a high school honors student who married a few weeks before his arrest, and was awaiting a visit to California from his parents.

Ott and his wife lived in Yuba City near the Beale base, about 120 miles northeast of San Francisco.

"He's just a tenant," June Yung, manager of Sugar House Apartments, said of Ott in an interview with a local newspaper. "I don't look into their private lives."